

## **Community or Commodity?**

**by  
Dan White**

I have been reading “A Sand County Almanac,” a book widely known in environmentalist circles, written by Aldo Leopold. Judy saw a copy at a local thrift sale, and we bought it, after having encountered Leopold’s name on a trip last fall to Silver City, New Mexico.

On pages viii and ix, in the Preface, Leopold wrote: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten.”

That either/or—commodity or community—got my attention.

Leopold loved nature from his early days. After graduating from Yale, Leopold went to work for the U.S. Forest Service in 1909, assigned to the Arizona/New Mexico region. Among his early achievements was the development of the first comprehensive plan for the Grand Canyon, soon to be a jewel in the National Park system.

Before leaving the USFS in 1924 to become a research director and then a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Leopold proposed the establishment of the Gila National Wilderness in New Mexico, the first such wilderness so designated and still among the largest. Leopold used the term wilderness to describe areas where the preservation of forests would be a principal purpose.

His impact on thinking about wilderness led the USFS to name its Wilderness Research Institute after Leopold, a center which Wikipedia called “the only federal research group in the United States dedicated to the development and dissemination of knowledge needed to improve management of wilderness, parks and similarly protected areas.” In 1980, a portion of the Gila Wilderness was separated out and designated the Aldo Leopold Wilderness. We saw a sign in the Gila Forest, north of Silver City, telling us these facts and others about Leopold and his career with USFS.

In short, he was a big deal in the wilderness movement.

On page 262 of “A Sand County Almanac,” Leopold wrote, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Recently, a volunteer USFS wilderness ranger told me that the

mantra of today's wilderness defenders is "leave no trace." That's not far off what Leopold thought.

His passion for wilderness notwithstanding, in his preface, Leopold did not advocate leaving all the land untouched. He championed using it "with love and respect."

In that context, what did he intend when he set up the either/or, commodity/community dichotomy?

Envisioning land as a commodity is not hard. How many of us own houses and the land on which they sit? How many of us have owned a piece of land for a future house or for investment purposes? How many wars have been fought, including in our own history, over pieces of land? How often have we groused about what an owner does to land he or she owns, including the corporate owners who deface the land in search of some other commodity?

Nature has her way of reminding us from time to time about land and owners. Tornados and hurricanes, floods created by torrential rains or massive snow melts; these are regular news. Less common but even more destructive was the swallowing of houses by pahoehoe lava, oozing down the streets below Kilauea Volcano not long ago. In that case, the land folks thought they owned no longer existed.

What we humans own are mortgages and titles, legal permissions to occupy space that, in reality, we hold only for brief periods in the arc of history. The land outlives us all.

People of a Certain Age, if you own a home, do you feel, as I do, that, in important ways, the home and the land own you, that you pay the bills to keep the home livable and the land safe?

So, yes. Some cultures have tended to view land as a commodity, to be bought and sold by individual owners. Other cultures have seen their role as stewards of the land.

Perhaps that is Leopold's ideal. If we are stewards, we are so in tandem with others, and the land is the basis of community.

The record of people who have come before us, as stewards of the land, is spotty, at best. Even indigenous peoples have cut down forests to use the wood or exterminated species in a quest for agricultural land. Today there are those who scar the land or pave it over, destroying more land. People have given ample evidence of their ability to do great harm, failing to consider the consequences.

Leopold would call such destruction a violation of the "love and respect" that are an "extension of ethics."

I'm not sure that I completely understand "land as a community to which we belong" as he meant it. And, as the population of the planet expands, preserving large tracts of natural space becomes more challenging. But I do believe that, when it comes to stewardship of the land, ensuring that those who come after us do not inherit a completely spoiled planet, however one defines that, is a community effort.

Now, what are you and I going to do about that?

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Your comments are welcome.

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